

EVOLUTION OF THULLAL

V. S. Sharma

Dance is the aesthetic presentation of human bodily movements suggesting definite ideas and concrete expressions as well as emotions and artistic concepts. There are mainly two styles of dance—*Tāṇḍava* and *Lāsyā*, both having distinguishing characteristics. Each nation, country or region has its own dance forms. Kerala is the southernmost state of India and it retains many ancient Dravidian cultural traditions. The dance forms of Kerala enrich and embellish the cultural scene. Two words often used to denote dance in Kerala are *Āṭṭom* and *Tullal*. The word *Āṭṭom* is found in combinations like *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, *Krishnanaṭṭam*, *Aṣṭapadiāṭṭam*, *Mohiniāṭṭom*, *Kathakali Āṭṭom*, *Āṭṭakkatha* etc. Similarly the word *Tullal* is seen in *Kōlam Tullal*, *Komaram Tullal*, *Paṭanayani Tullal*, *Oṭṭan Tullal* etc. The word *āṭṭom* can mean dancing movement and the word *Tullal* denotes excited jump, dance, rhythmic movements (mainly up and down movements) with gestures. *Āṭṭom* is more refined than the *Tullal* type, more sophisticated and more suggestive.

In this paper the subject dealt with is dance in Kerala in the perspective of *Tullal*. *Tullal* shows the result of a long evolution of the various dance styles of Kerala. It is a product of the 18th century but it has a background of many years.

Like many art forms in India, the dance styles in Kerala also have a religious bent in general. The content is *puranic* or mythological, and therefore with religious association. Faubian Bowers says: "Religion often is the only reason for any dramatic representation in Temple festivals, holidays, the inducting of the favour of the gods, the expelling of demons,...."¹ Prof. K.R. Pisharody also states, "almost all the varieties of our spectacular entertainments are characterised by a religious atmosphere in some cases intrinsic and in some cases extrinsic, which may be made the basis of classification. Thus we have purely religious, semi-religious and secular types".²

The spectacular art forms of Kerala are classified as religious, semi-religious and secular, as the following examples show:

- (i) Religious—*Bhagavatippāṭṭu*, *Tiyyāṭṭu*, *Pāṇa*, *Kalamezhuttu Pāṭṭu*, *Kaniyarkali*, *Mutiyettu* etc.

- (ii) Semi-religious—*Sunghakali, Krishnattom, Kuttu, Kutiyattom.*
- (iii) Secular—*Elamuttipurappāṭṭu, Tullal, Korattiyāṭṭom, Mohiniyāṭṭom, Kaykoṭṭikkali, Pāthakom, Kathakali.*

This does not mean a division into watertight compartments. Almost all the forms have either some didactic message to convey or some mythological story to tell or some local tradition to express. Even the secular forms may have some religious, mythological or superstitious colour.

Here, Kerala's native art form of *Tullal* is taken up for a brief survey. *Tullal* is significant because it is the culmination of various traditions in art and literature.

The chief forms of artistic performances found everywhere are folk and classical. In Kerala also we have many folk forms as well as sophisticated classical art forms, called *Deśi* and *Mārgi* respectively. The *Tullal* variety presents more *deśi* characteristics while the *Āṭṭom* type has more classical features, as seen in *Paṭanyaṇi Tullal* and *Kūṭiyāṭṭom* respectively.

Tullal is a special art form which deserves consideration. The word *Tullal* here stands for the three varieties—*Ottam (oṭṭan) Tullal, Śitankān Tullal* and *Parayan Tullal*. Very often *Ottan Tullal* is used as a cover term for all the three varieties. This particular art form has been evolved in the 18th century by the Poet—Laureate Kuncan Nampiar, though there existed many crude forms of *Tullal* before.

An ancient text *Kriṣṇarjuna Yudham* is supposed to be a *Tullal* poem meant for presentation on a stage. There is no evidence to ascertain whether it was ever staged or not. The language used in the text is highly influenced by Tamil and it proves its antiquity; the *Tullal* meters are employed in the composition and the text proves that it was written for stage presentation. Evidently it is a pre-Nampiar *Tullal* work. There were some other *Tullal* forms as *Patayani Tullal, Kolam Tullal* etc. in which masks were used by the characters. Distinct dress-forms for *Ottan, Parayan* and *Śitankān* were adopted by Kuncan Nampiar who was very familiar with both the ancient folk art forms and classical art forms of Kerala. The traditional profession of the Nampiar community was to beat the drum (*Milāv*) for *Kūṭtu* and *Kūṭiyattom* performed by the *Cākyār*. In *Kūṭtu*, the *Cākyār* narrates mythological stories in the temple premises. *Kūṭtu* contains satire and social criticism and hence it is didactic: it is a solo performance with very simple costumes, accompaniments etc. Kuncan Nampiar imbibed the traditions of *Kathakali* also. The different cultural aspects which influenced the poet were fused into the whole art of *Tullal*. The folk characters like *Ottan, Parayan* and *Śitankān*, the satirical criticism found in the *Cākyār Kūṭtu* and the *Vidusaka* of *Kutiyattom* and musical element of *Kathakali* are combined in *Tullal*.

To present *Tullal* neither a particular stage nor a screen is needed and it has only the regular system of performance including Ganapati and Vandanam (*i.e.*, invocation of gods, patrons etc.) *Pativattam* (preliminary dance steps) *Munnarangu* (prologue) etc. The actor decorates himself with native colour combinations and simple ornaments of local make. The performance may last for about two hours.

Kuncan Nampiar composed about 60 mythological poems in definite *Tullal* metres in an ever vibrant diction. They overflow with social criticism, sarcasm, didactic content etc. The *Kuttu* artist and *Kathakali* artist had a refined audience in temple premises while the folk artists had simple, uneducated village as their audience. Kuncan Nampiar brought the two groups together. His poems catered to the interests of all. He himself says very often that he wrote poetry only intelligible to the common man. He combines realism and romanticism; he unites the past with the present; he harmonizes the classical with the folk elements. The *Tullal* poems contain the local words, phrases and sayings in plenty. *Tullal* poetry conveys the message of energy and courage, presents the unsophisticated simple life of the common man in a style which is most appealing to the public at large. He criticises everybody without any discrimination and the *Tullal* poetry clearly presents a cross-section of the 18th century Kerala. I will quote a portion from *Pancendropakhyanam Parayan Tullal* as an example for the reflection of life the poet describe a situation when Yama the lord of death was engaged in performing a sacrifice leaving the world to shift for itself, and it gives a very beautiful discussion of a life without death in Kerala:

When there was no death:

*Old people have begun to crowd the earth
They don't die since death is not there.
The grand-pa of the old grand pa is still alive
Even his grandpa has not yet died.
Five hundred years old, yet passing for children
Grandpas have their own grandpas*

.....

*Toothless people ten crore strong
Lie down like dolls in every house.
Countless are men and women
Whose eyelashes even have turned grey
Many are the deaf and blind, and bald heads
With scalp more polished than a brass vessel.*

*Brahmins forsake sacrifices, rituals and duties
 No temple to worship nor peace of mind.
 Haughty people act as they please (?)
 There are no rules governing human life.
 Virtuous women risk their chastity.
 Men begin to lead a licentious life.
 Bad people, if not cured by fear of death
 Will not hesitate to behave like this.
 Harlots keep their husband away
 Who provide for their residence and sustenance.
 When husbands approach their wives
 Paramours beat them; incivilities do cross bounds
 It becomes worse than the reign of kali
 In the absence of death all were distressed.*

*Those who eat flesh go without food
 Nor could they die as Yama is away.
 Wild animals, lion, bear and panther
 Eat each other raw flesh everywhere.
 Big fish swallow small fish entirely
 But they come out unhurt by another way.
 The earth is crowded with cruel beings
 Nobody is there to give even a meal.*

The four varieties of *Abhinaya*, *Vāchika*, *Āngika*, *Āhārya* and *Satwika* are incorporated in *Tullal* as simply as possible and without violating the discipline of *Nātyasāstra*. The bodily movements are mainly of the *Tāndava* type though there may be some rare *lāsyā* touches occasionally. The actor sings and acts. The verses are repeated by the players on the *Mrdanga* (previously *Maddala*) and the *Kaimani* (Cymbals) called *Ponnani* and *Śinkīti* respectively. The verses are written in a simple but rhythmic diction, the style varying according to the characters and the requirement of the context.

That the *Tullal* is a blend of various traditions found in folk and classical styles is substantiated by Reginald Massey and Rina Singha: "This dance lies somewhere between a folk dance and a classical dance. Its roots are certainly the same as those of *Kathakali* and broadly speaking it follows the same principles. At the same time it has a very close affinity with the people. It has played a large part in these reactions and entertainment, for it deliberately sets out to be non-academic"³

In this paper detailed description of the four aspects of *abhinaya* in *Tullal* is not attempted. The distinguishing characteristics of *Tullal* can be summed up as follows:-

1. *Tullal* contains fully the native elements in its form and content.

2. The *Ottan*, *Parayan* and *Sitankan* varieties have their roots in the folk performance *Paṭayani Tullal*.

3. *Tullal* is a secular art and it is highly satirical and critical.

4. The three unities of space, time and action are ignored in *Tullal*. But the *Tullal* poetry of Nampiar presents a cross-section of the 18th century Kerala.

5. The folk culture and classical art traditions are woven together in the *Tullal* art form.

6. As a most popular spectacular art form it was shaped in such a way as to gratify the aesthetic taste of the people of all levels and it reflects the life of a generation in Kerala.

7. The main aspect, the *vacikabhinaya* is more effective than any other audio-visual art form and it is a means of powerful social criticism as well as moral inspiration; it instructs the audience at the same time as it delights them.

8. This art form has survived through the last two centuries through many composers and performers. But as a literary and art form, *Tullal* has been losing its popularity during the last five decades.

9. The combination of the *nritta*, *nrtya* and *natya* aspects of *abhinaya* is unique in *Tullal*, and its masculine, vigorous quality suits the form and content.

10. The aspects of expressiveness and dramatic power of this solo-performance become the more striking in comparison with similar other forms.

The roots of *Tullal* go deep into the ancient arts and literature, but in form it is new. The *Tullal* poet took into account the taste of the audience also in presenting his art and he succeeded in this novel creative attempt. Nobody else could excell him in the field. He can be undoubtedly qualified as the pioneer in the field of satirical verse composition in Malayalam. He shaped an art form for the common man and made it popular and dear to all. It depicts on a broad canvas the life and culture of Kerala. In its combination of literary and artistic elements with a socio-cultural perspective, *Tullal* is a dance form with few parallels.

NOTES

1. Faubian Bowers, *Theatre in the East—A survey of Ancient Dance and Drama*, Grove press, New York, 1953, p. 24.
2. K.R. Pishorody, *Theatre of the Hindus*, Susil Gupta Ltd., Calcutta, 1955, p. 166.
3. Reginald Massey and Rina Singha, *Indian Dances—Their history and growth*, Faber & Faber, London, 1967, p. 112.